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EVENTS AS PLATFORMS, NETWORKS, AND COMMUNITIES

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This introduction to the special issue on events as platforms, networks, and communities reviews recent research on these subjects. It outlines the previous work of the ATLAS Events Group in developing a "network approach to events," as well as conceptualizing the differences between event networks and platforms.

Key words: Event networks; Event platforms; Network society; Field configuring events

Introduction

Because of their power as temporal markers and social catalysts, events are increasingly being used by places as a means to attract attention, form networks, and build communities. This is important not just in terms of developing social cohesion in the contemporary network society (Castells, 2013), but also for the value creation activities of enterprises and the place promotion campaigns of public authorities.

This special issue on "Events as Platforms, Networks, and Communities" presents a selection of articles from the Association for Tourism and Leisure Research and Education (ATLAS) conference in Copenhagen in 2018. We are aware that networks in particular are a frequent subject of events research (e.g., Getz et al., 2006; Misener & Mason, 2006; Todd et al., 2017), but many of these studies rest on a common assumption that events by their very nature as gathering spaces automatically create network, platform, or community effects. What this special issue seeks to examine is *how* these processes work, and the ways in which events support and in turn are shaped by networks, platforms, and communities. In this special issue we seek to go beyond casual observations of the existence of networks and platforms to examine their type and function, and how they are linked to different offline and online communities.

Our view, based on an extensive body of research related to event networks (Richards, 2017; Richards et al., 2013), is that networks can be viewed as a system of actors or nodes connected by flows of information and resources. The interconnections provided by the network can provide moments and spaces for events to occur, as well as ordering the hierarchy of events. Analyzing the distribution of

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event connections and nodes can help identify the relationship between core and periphery network locations, or reveal "small world" structures within networks. Measurement of the centrality of nodes can indicate the relative importance and power of the corresponding actors, for example through techniques such as Social Network Analysis (SNA) (Jarman et al., 2014). The processes through which network links, nodes, and hubs function can also be the object of studies of network value creation (Colombo & Richards, 2017). The ways in which networks are constructed, maintained, and produce social and other effects are attracting growing attention from event scholars. Many of these studies focus on the role of event stakeholders in forming networks (Larson, 2009; Todd et al., 2017).

One challenge that we have faced in researching the event-related roles of networks and platforms is the lack of distinction between these terms. Although events are often described as platforms (e.g., Cervenan, 2017), there is little precision in the definition of the role, structure, or effects of an event-based platform, or how these are distinct from the wider networks of which they form part. In our view, specific hubs within a network can be developed to act as a platform that serves to frame and highlight particular connections and flows in the network. A platform can be defined in physical terms as a flat, raised area or structure, or in virtual terms as an operating system. These ideas include three basic concepts or qualities: the flatness of the surface of a platform that enables movement and interaction, the quality of being raised in relation to other surfaces, and the potential to program and create new content or structures.

This approach to the definition of platforms has some implications for our analysis. In particular, whereas the network can in many cases be seen as a simple connector or carrier of flows, the platform is a space that frames these flows, facilitating performance and visibility through the selection of specific actors and actions. In many cases networks use platforms as essential tools of network maintenance, making the network and its members visible at a certain point in time. The platform will often take the form of an event, or part of an event, which is supported by the flows and activities generated by the network. In many cases the performance role of the platform can be fairly literal, for example the stage at a music festival or an agricultural show (see the article by Langridge-Thomas, Crowther, & Westwood in this issue). In other cases, the platform may be a more embedded part of the event, such as the exhibition floor of a trade event. Paleo and Wijnberg (2006) argued that music festivals and concerts can be global platforms for exhibiting musical talent and for communicating musicians' cultural newness. Colombo and Richards (2017) also discussed the relationship between the platform provided by the Sónar Festival of Electronic Music in its home city of Barcelona, and the global network of different editions of the Sónar Festival in different cities around the world.

If we conceptualize the role of the platform as facilitating performance through framing, then questions of power inevitably arise. Who is responsible for the framing, and for the selection of legitimate actors and actions on the platform? Again, at most events this may seem obvious, as the event organizer is usually responsible for programming content. But as the articles in this issue by Langridge-Thomas, Crowther, and Westwood and Colombo, Altuna, and Oliver-Grasiot point out, in many events the program is determined in a more bottom-up fashion, and there may be a wide range of actors involved in selecting and framing the legitimate actors or the platform.

The debate about the nature of platforms is also complicated by the emergence of new technology platforms that link people and things through digital technology. As Nick Srnicek (2017) highlighted in *Platform Capitalism*, the platform is not neutral—companies like Airbnb are actively involved in curating the content of the platform, even if the users are often unaware of this (Bialski, 2016). However, some event platforms do act in a similar way to digital platforms: they facilitate exchanges between producers and consumers, enabling peer-to-peer interaction (e.g., think about car boot sales or vintage record fairs). As Jarman illustrates in his article on fringe festivals in this issue, networks of events can also function as a platform that supports the activities of individual network members.

The growing roles of event networks and platforms as facilitating and framing devices is also leading to more cities and regions recognizing their potential to stimulate growth and innovation (Fisker et al., 2019). As Richards (2017) noted in

his analysis of different forms of event governance, network-based approaches to events are becoming more prevalent in cities. In some senses this mirrors the trends in urban governance as a whole, where the "city as platform" concept (Bollier, 2015) is becoming widespread.

Such developments point to a growing knowledge creation and dissemination function for events, which not only animate physical spaces, but which can also help to stimulate and organize other activities related to the knowledge economy, such as big data and open data systems. In the light of these developments it makes sense for cities to adopt a more holistic approach to events and their outputs by constructing platforms that can support events, maximize their knowledge production and circulation potential, and help to generate value-creation activities in the city. Such platforms can also help to support the flows of people and contacts that add vibrancy to places and which can increase "eventfulness."

In the past, cities wishing to develop positive externalities from (major) events have been largely dependent on achieving synergies between the aims of the city, the media, and event organizers (Rennen, 2007). Increasingly, cities are seeking ways to try and steer events and their networks and reduce the extent to which external parties can control developments. This shift has been supported by the emergence of city networks, or what Fernández de Losada (2019) termed "privately-led city platforms," such as Eurocities or the Organization of World Heritage Cities. However, smaller cities are rarely invited to be at the forefront of the governance of the new platforms: their visibility often continues to be confined to "dedicated networks" such as those focusing on peripheral cities or intermediary cities. Therefore, small cities have to find specialist niches (Lorentzen & van Heur, 2012) or else try and develop coordinated programs that act as a focus to develop specific fields. Alternatively, they can develop strategies to focus attention and embed networks; for example, by attracting switchers and (inter)national platforms to be active in the city (Richards & Duif, 2018). Therefore, the combination of networks (connections) and platforms (as mechanisms for focusing attention) becomes an attractive option.

Another focus of research in the study of networks and platforms is the relationship between these phenomena and specific economic, cultural, or social fields. Because networks and platforms are often constructed around themes of mutual interest and activity for producers and consumers, they often relate to a specific field. For example, in his article Richards pays particular attention to the role of the field in terms of value creation, while Langridge-Thomas, Crowther, and Westwood analyze the iconic Royal Welsh Show in relation to the field of agriculture. Such events can be seen as "field configuring events" (FCE). FCE are "temporary social organizations such as tradeshows, professional gatherings, technology contests, and business ceremonies that encapsulate and shape the development of professions, technologies, markets, and industries" (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1026). As Lange et al. (2014) explained, FCEs are events that are capable of influencing the (global) field or network they operate in. One of the important aspects of FCEs is that the event serves to support the field, which at the same time increases the importance of the event.

The FCE concept also highlights the role of events as a platform for expression and exchange. Arguably the physical copresence of the event is what helps to bring the event networks to life. Therefore, events function as nodes in the network, where the network orchestrators, actors, and the flows between them become more visible. Such events act as a form of temporary cluster (Comunian, 2017), where knowledge spillovers occur and actors congregate to exchange ideas and establish their position in the network. As Richards shows in his analysis of event networks in this issue, events themselves can act as temporary clusters that in turn can spawn further events. In their study of the global fashion industry, Jansson and Power (2010) also underlined the importance of events in establishing urban hierarchies in the fashion field, and that fashion events in turn benefit from the hierarchical positions that they help to create. This suggests a high degree of synergy between events and their networks, with networks channeling attention to events as temporal network nodes, and events providing essential support to network processes. This also underlines the essential duality of actors and events, where events serve as foci through which group phenomena can be manifested (Field et al., 2006).

In some ways the FCE concept mirrors Larson's (2009) conceptualization of event networks in terms of the "political market square" (PSQ) metaphor. She identified three ideal types of network, labeled the jungle, the park, and the garden, representing a tumultuous, a dynamic, and an institutionalized event network, respectively. Most attention has been paid to institutionalized networks (the garden), but much less to the tumultuous and dynamic forms of networking. Larson pointed out that in a rapidly changing environment, events that are institutionalized may find it difficult to adapt and innovate, whereas more flexible networks may prosper. She also pointed out that power relationships in event networks are often uneven, and that the political dimension of the network is therefore crucial. Major institutions in the event network will often play a key role in determining the functioning and goals of the event network. This also underlines that organizations join or form networks for a variety of reasons, including the need to gain legitimacy, to serve clients more effectively, to attract more resources, or to address complex problems. In doing so, the network members will try and gain a specific position in the network that maximizes the flow of resources and attention towards themselves. All network organizations seek to achieve goals that they could not achieve independently (Provan & Kenis, 2008), but the achievement of individual goals does not detract from other members of the network. In other words, networking is not a zero-sum game, but rather a process of creating network value (Colombo & Richards, 2017). This is an issue examined in the article by Norman and Nyarko in this issue in the context of a network of small cities.

Networks will also support and be supported by communities. This applies not just to the physical communities that often sustain community events (Jarman, 2018), but it may also relate to the development of online and offline communities around events (Simons, 2019). The development of event communities is highlighted in a number of the contributions in this special issue, including the community developed around cultural activities in Barcelona and Brazil, agricultural shows as a focus for agricultural communities, and the transnational community developed through fringe festivals.

Taken together, the articles in the special issue illustrate the diversity and complexity of event networks, platforms, and communities. In structuring the issue, we have decided to start with those contributions that deal with a more microlevel of social interaction and community building (social groups and industry sectors), gradually moving towards articles that deal with more macrolevel interaction (cities and events).

In the first article, Lénia Marques, Carla Borba, and Janna Michael introduce the Event Social Interaction Scale (ESIS). They have focused on the event as social interaction platform, with particular focus given to the dimensions of cocreation, group socialization, and interaction ritual chains. The case study for this work is the festivities of São João in Brazil, through surveys collected from participants in 2016 and 2017. Findings reveal that participation is a precursor for social interaction in a variety of forms, and that those who are most invested in the events are most open to engagement with strangers. Marques et al. recognize that the literature provides various insights into events as opportunities for socializing, including business-related networking and the escapism of music festivals. Their contribution to this special issue pursues the relationship between social interaction and the social experience of events. The article builds upon recent work by the ATLAS Events Special Interest Group, to better understand festivals and events as platforms for interplay and exchange in multiple forms (de Geus et al., 2016; Richards et al., 2013). The ESIS is presented as a quantitative tool for the identification and examination of social interaction in a variety of forms, with potential applications across all event types. Public and participant engagement with both known and unknown group members is examined by the authors, with implications for event producers and policy makers seeking to promote events as platforms for social interaction.

Community engagement is at the heart of Weng Si (Clara) Lei and Chun Chen (Claudia) Li's contribution to this special issue, in both online and offline environments. Their work is innovative in both its methods and its focus. For the former the authors applied a combined methods approach, using netnography to examine an online festival-focused chat group, which led to in-depth interviews with festival attendees who were active members of the online community. Lei and Li's focus is, as they say, distinct from the typical concentration on Facebook

and other Western social media; they have chosen contributors to the WeChat online platform, and their interactions about China's MIDI Music Festival. The key themes of this article relate to festival attendance motivations, social network participation motives, postevent sharing of memories and trust building, and catalysts for event attendance and participation in online interaction. Lei and Li demonstrate that the actions of festival organizers after their events can contribute significantly to the continued relevance, activity, and sustainability of online communities.

In their analysis of the Royal Welsh Show, Greg Langridge-Thomas, Phil Crowther, and Caroline Westwood argue that this long-running agricultural event can be seen as a canopy for a diversity of platforms, through which networks are cocreated between the event organizers and participants. They emphasize that the activities that are framed by the event platforms are organized both in a top-down fashion by the event organizers and in a bottom-up, ad hoc fashion by event participants and partners. Therefore, much content for this major event is generated by the extended stakeholder network of the Show, with the stakeholders contributing in return for the framing provided by the platform and the exchange of knowledge that this can provide. Therefore, the different actors in the event network (organizer, sponsors, exhibitors, suppliers, and attendees) can all extract value from the platforms provided by the event. Again, Langridge-Thomas et al. conclude that the networks and platforms are interdependent, but they sketch clearly distinct roles for these different elements of events. One particular element of agricultural shows is the competition aspect of many platforms dedicated to livestock and produce. This provides network members with opportunities for distinguishing themselves and heightens the attention that can be generated among competitors and attendees.

In their contribution to this special issue Alba Colombo, Jaime Altuna, and Esther Oliver-Grasiot analyze the role of *Correfoc* (literally "fire running") groups in Catalunya, showing how the pyrotechnic activities engaged in at different events are part of a network that becomes physically visible in the platform or hub provided by La Mercè, the major festival in the capital city of Barcelona. In their analysis they pose the different local Correfoc groups as nodes in a national network. However, when the different groups are brought together in the major event, they have a greater need to distinguish themselves from each other and to reaffirm their local identity at the same time as performing the collective ritual that binds the groups together. Therefore, the article argues that the nodes of the network and the platform provided by the Barcelona festival are interdependent, and that both are essential elements of the ritual. The Correfoc also seems to illustrate McNamee's (1995) principle that practices have a social history that is transferred through generations of participants.

Towns and smaller cities in the UK are the focus of Mark Norman and Nana Nyarko's article in this collection. Their work is founded on the application of the business model canvas, and testing its value creating dimensions. Their analysis of 112 surveys from local government organizations identified the importance of "activities" (over "resources" and "partners") in the creation of value as part of an event tourism strategy. That is to say, the practical operationalization of engagement activities by the local authority, to energize local networks of event stakeholders. The authors are also concerned with determining which attributes and resources might determine a local government organization's effectiveness as the focal node of its network. The event studies literature is replete with both case studies and economic impact assessments. Norman and Nyarko have instead delivered a much broader appreciation of the field, and have utilized a network perspective to explore economic value. Their focus on towns and smaller cities means that they can reflect the experiences of destinations with limited resources, while recognizing that such places are pitting themselves against larger and more established centers of eventfulness.

In his analysis of the Bosch 500 program in the Dutch city of 's-Hertogenbosch, Greg Richards continues his analysis of this case study of event networks and platforms (Richards, 2017). The article in this collection highlights the longer-term limitations of the city's stakeholders to generate sustainable activity and benefits from Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch's quincentennial year in 2016. Richards' analysis highlights the contemporary successes generated by the city, as it created network value and established itself as a platform

for the presentation and understanding of the artist's work. Subsequent years have not played out so well and elements of "Bosch fatigue" are reported, recasting the legacy of 2016 as a missed opportunity. This longitudinal approach is also an important reminder that the study of dynamic networks is all too often constrained by analyses that rely on snapshots in time. Richards offers a means by which the appreciation of events might ultimately become more sophisticated and nuanced, recognizing their institutional value alongside their intrinsic and instrumental worth.

The nature, structure, and value of networks in the case of Fringe festivals is the subject of the contribution from David Jarman. He analyzes a network created by a formalized transnational group of Fringe festivals, drawing on the theoretical work of Castells (2000) and Richards (2015). He finds Castells' concept of the network society to be a useful tool for examining the functioning of the Fringe festival network because the festivals serve to link the global space of flows with the local space of places. In the network society festivals can work together internationally while at the same time maintaining a local identity, which makes them attractive as a platform for performance. Jarman also finds evidence for Richards' iterative and pulsar qualities of events; arguing, however, that Fringe festivals may combine both of these qualities at the same time. By stimulating innovation, the Fringes act as pulsar events in their local environment, while developing practices of event organization and form that provide iterative continuity for the local and international networks. Jarman's article is based on Social Network Analysis, which helps to examine and illuminate the connections between network partners. This analysis shows that pulsar effects can extend to the whole network, helping to generate bridging capital between festivals, while iterative effects are also evident at local level through the production of bonding social capital and local political support.

Some tentative conclusions can be drawn from the articles presented in this special issue. Taken together, the articles illustrate the important and varied effects of event networks and platforms, and in particular underline how events support networks, which in turn facilitate the events. The cases presented analyze a wide range of different contexts, which shows that the research on event networks is beginning to move beyond the more common groups of stakeholders, for example into the territory of online networks.

However, it is also clear that most of the articles in this special issue still focus primarily on networks, rather that the platforms or communities that are associated with them. Hopefully these articles will help stimulate a more holistic approach, which considers not just physical networks, but also virtual networks and the platforms and communities associated with event networks. In building a wider vision of these relationships, it is also important to distinguish more clearly between networks and platforms, as these have differential roles and effects. Then it might be possible to understand more about the ways in which networks, platforms, and communities interact and strengthen each other. In the previous literature most work has concentrated on networks (perhaps also because these accord with common forms of stakeholder analysis) and there has been much less attention for the role of platforms.

There seems to be room for future research in analyzing the role of platforms, and their role in global and local networks. However, we can also pose the question of whether "platforms" simply represent a new or updated vocabulary and label for something that has been widely recognized for generations? For example, post-second world war arts festivals saw themselves as platforms for international cultural reconstruction; business events are presented as platforms for networking and conversation as much as hearing keynote speeches; mega-sporting events are platforms for Olympic ideals, international dialogue, and mediated celebrations.

We can also identify a need for new approaches to the study of networks and platforms, particularly as they can be developed and managed in a top-down or bottom-up fashion, as Langridge-Thomas et al. indicate. In the special issue articles we also see a distinction between ad hoc and informal networks on the one hand, and those created by and centered on local authorities and other focal organizations on the other. Perhaps networks are formed and reformed in both contexts as their members require, while platforms are only truly realized when given direction and purpose by important and influential individuals and organizations.

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